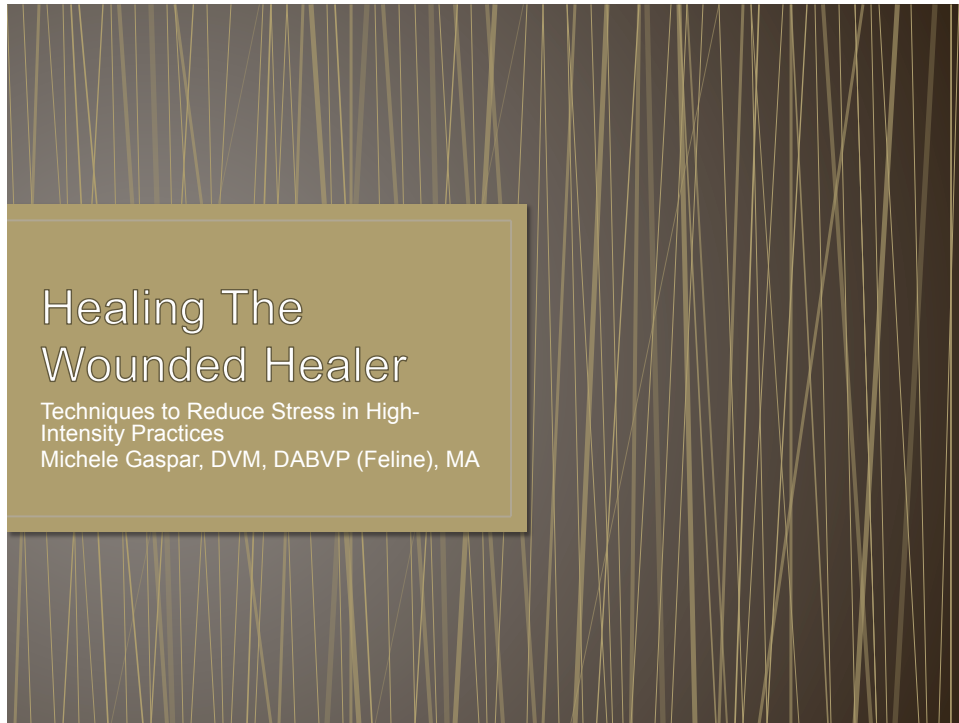


Healing the Healer: Techniques to Reduce Stress  
in High-Intensity Practices  
– Dr. Michele Gaspar



## The Questions For Today and All Days:

- How do we sustain ourselves in the practice of shelter work so that we do not experience burnout and compassion fatigue?
- How can we develop self-compassion and get rid of the negative schemas of “shoulds” and our addiction to perfection?
- Why are we doing what we’re doing? For whom are we really doing it?
- What are our personal histories with loss and attachment?
- Why do I feel the way I do?
- If I am angry, what are the roots of my anger and frustration?

## Starting At the Beginning: Definitions

- We use many definitions to describe the emotional side of what we do.
- Consider the words : Empathy, sympathy and compassion. How do they differ?

## Empathy

- This is very personal.
- Identification with or experiencing of another's thoughts, feelings or attitudes when those are not being actively communicated.
- Example : Identifying with the animal brought to a shelter.

## Sympathy

- An impersonal feeling.
- We feel pity for, feel badly for or feel sorry for another.
- Example: Watching the news of a disaster in another country.

## Compassion

- A feeling of concern for another's needs that is accompanied by a subsequent desire to alleviate suffering.
- As such, it implies action BUT DOES NOT DEMAND IT.
- Compassion is in the INTENTION.

## Compassion Fatigue and Burnout

- Compassion Fatigue : “Vicarious traumatization”. This can occur by exposure to one case or be due to a “cumulative” level of trauma.
- Burnout : Cumulative process marked by emotional exhaustion and withdrawal associated with increased workload and institutional stress. NOT trauma related.

## Is It Burnout or Compassion Fatigue?

- The Stages of Burnout have been identified as :
  - Enthusiasm
  - Stagnation
  - Frustration
  - Apathy

### Commonalities of Burnout and Compassion Fatigue

Emotional exhaustion

Reduced sense of personal accomplishment or meaning in work

Mental and physical exhaustion

Decreased interactions with others (isolation)

Depersonalization (symptoms disconnected from real causes)

## What Results

- Ability to function is interfered with or altered.
- Situation or incident does not feel ordinary; it feels “traumatic.”
- “Compassion stress” impinges upon or breaks through normal boundaries.
- Regularly waking up tired in the morning and struggling to get to work.
- Feeling as if you are working harder but accomplishing less.
- Becoming easily frustrated and irritated.
- Losing compassion for some people while becoming overly involved in others.
- Bored, disgusted, illness, aches and pains.

## Is There An Antidote?

- Many recommendations have been made for those suffering from burnout and compassion fatigue.
- Generally, these revolve around self care; developing other interests and getting medical and mental health attention.
- At the core of each of these recommendations is the recognition that we need to change our cognitions and our perceptions in order to create a healthy, wholesome and balanced life.

## Mindfulness Meditation

- A secular, contemplative practice that provides focused attention to our lives as moment-to-moment constructions.
- An evidence-based practice that has been shown to reduce stress, compassion fatigue and burnout by positively impacting those parts of the brain and central nervous system that regulate our emotions and reactivity. It decreases automaticity and makes us more human and humane.
- An inexpensive practice that can be done anywhere at anytime.
- Congruent with modern lifestyles.
- A gift to yourselves, your families, co-workers and the animals in your care.

## The History of Mindfulness

- Closely associated with Buddhist vipassana meditation.
- Brought to the West by many teachers, including Jon Kabat-Zinn who organized the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts.
- Studied in a variety of institutions and most notably at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Center for Investigating Healthy Minds.

## What Does Mindfulness Do To Our Bodies?

- Physiological effects include:
  - Hypometabolic state, with metabolism in meditation in a deeper state of rest than in sleep. Oxygen in sleep decreased eight percent; in meditation, it decreases 10-20 percent.
  - Reduces blood lactate levels.
  - Increases serotonin and melatonin levels.
  - Decreases cortisol.
  - Meditation reduced heart attacks, strokes and deaths in high-risk individuals, decreased systolic BP by 5 mm HG and increased disease-free interval (American Heart Association)

## What Does Mindfulness Do To Our Brains?

- Practitioners of mindfulness have a better control over their emotions (connection between the amygdala and dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and pre-frontal cortex); this connects our emotional reactions with attention, concentration and emotional regulation (Creswell, et. al., 2008).
- Holzel, et. al. (2007) found that experienced mindfulness meditators had increased grey matter in brain regions that are typically activated in meditation, like the right anterior insula. This allows us to think about what we are experiencing.
- Lutz, et. al. (2008) found that mindfulness meditators had an increased ability to experience shifts in brain activity associated with positive emotions, like compassion.



## Additional Benefits of Mindfulness

- Shifts us from horizontal to vertical living.
- Horizontal living is what we do automatically and has a tendency to be mechanical. Vertical living allows us to become engaged in what we are doing. We integrate ourselves to the task at hand.
- Mindfulness does not create detachment, but DOES create a space between thoughts and actions. Our thoughts are recognized and welcomed, but we do not dwell on them. So, less rumination.
- Mindfulness is not just for defusing our personal and destructive “payloads,” it opens up space in our work for those who work with us.
- Diffuses the “them-us” mentality.
- Fewer errors, a safer workplace.

## Living Vertically

- There is greater empathy and lack of depersonalization.
- Vertical living provides nourishment, satisfaction and integrity to our work.
- Verticality comes to us by : Noticing our breath, prioritizing our tasks so that they are not fragmented.
- We see our thoughts and perceptions for what they are and how they are limited. So, our truths do not become truths “with a capital T.” As a result, we have compassion for ourselves and for others. We do not go through life giving from an “empty bucket.”



## A Taste of Mindfulness

- We'll begin with a body scan, in order to create a relaxed physical form.
- For 10 minutes, we will practice, just counting our breaths (each inhalation and exhalation is “one” breath.
- Count from 1-10 and return to the one, etc.
- Don't judge thoughts, just notice them.

## Some Final Thoughts

- Compassionate practice may be summarized as : I will do the best with what time and resources allow.
- We don't know the entire story and any story we might create, most likely leaves out important parts.
- We grow, nurture ourselves and heal through relationships and community.
- Consider Chris Adrian's “The Question”